



I AM NOT MY HAIR:

A Black Woman's Struggle with Identity Through Hair

Feliece Turner
Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan

Abstract

People in society often base their identity on the way they look, modeling themselves after images seen in the media. Constructed through cultural ideals, image as identity has become the basis for determining societal norms. In this research I use Black feminist theory to show how hair in the Black community has become a contributing factor when determining standards of identity through image, as well as through cultural acceptance of what it means to be Black. Through autoethnography I analyze the ways in which societal, cultural, gendered and media norms control race representations based on hair. By using my own experiences as the basis for cultural examination I look at the ways in which Black women use hair either to conform or reject hegemonic standards of beauty. I find that it is through intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality that we perpetuate and construct representations of Blackness. Thus I argue that Eurocentric values of straight long hair construct a sociopolitical/cultural ideology

of Black women's beliefs of what determines physical attractiveness.

Sitting here looking around my room I know I shouldn't have straight hair. Women who listen to neo-soul and Erykah Badu, with paintings of Black women wearing do-rags don't have my type of hair. I know that the straightened highlighted strands that lie atop my head and drape my face shouldn't be a part of my physical makeup. My hair should say "Black pride" not "Black girl trying to be White;" I feel like a walking contradiction. I hate that I feel this way. I hate that when I look in the mirror I see Beyonce; hair that is straight, long and flowing and not the natural purity of Angela Davis. It's like I'm trying to hide my true identity; as if I'm submitting to the racist/sexist/classist culture I despise. To be pure means to be natural and to be natural means to be authentic. My hair does not express that identity, but one that is fake and altered, transforming the real me. I want my hair to be a testament to my Blackness; a socio-political statement to who I am as a woman.

Stemming from a social and political past where White features, those of blue eyes and blond hair as the social norm, Black women have struggled to find a space where their natural, kinky Black hair is a symbol of beauty (Banks 2000). In response to not being recognized for their natural identity, some women choose to emulate dominant ideologies in attempts to be accepted (Collins 2000). Due to this there has emerged a significant divide over what beauty is in Black culture. On the one hand to have "good hair" is to have straight strands while the afro, dreads or kinky type style are labeled as "nappy." The naturalistic hair style becomes a symbol of unattractiveness and therefore unwanted. And while some view the afro as a signature of pride and connection to their roots and to be "weaved out" is to be a "sellout," it is the women with unnatural, straight hair that the majority of society, (including those in the Black community) find more accepting and beautiful (See citation [Banks 2000; hooks 1992]).

This dilemma is one that Black women have struggled

over throughout history. The conflict of what it means to be Black and beautiful is one that we struggle with on a daily basis. Is this a socially constructed dichotomy resulting from negative stereotypes of women in the Black community? If not, then where do such ideals come from? What determines a woman's Blackness when it comes to hair? Am I assimilating to white culture because I have straight hair? If I change and go natural does that mean that I've discovered my Blackness? What does it mean exactly to "discover Blackness?" And why do I play into this ideal of authentic Blackness? These are just a few of the questions that I will explore and discuss here.

I see this project as an essential component in the lives of all Black women, because it's not just about hair; it's about ideologies of race and gender in Black culture. With hair being a prominent factor of identity within the culture, conversations about race/class/gender must be present. Examining theories presented by some of the most authoritative figures in the field, I discuss the relevance of race/class/gender analyzed in African American critical theory, Black feminism, and Whiteness theory.

However while I do include a vast amount of literature and theory discussed by such theorists, I cannot help but incorporate bits and pieces of my own personal standpoint; thus I construct my argument through the method of autoethnography. Because the cultural ideologies presenting and labeling Black women are extremely relevant to my life, I feel it necessary to include discussions of my own experiences. Autoethnography allows me to do this. As a method that is both personal, lived experience and cultural analysis, in this paper I am able to examine a cultural phenomenon through the reflexive lens of my own life. Before I can do this however, I must discuss the literature that has been created surrounding this topic; this discussion is provided in the next section.

Determining My Blackness

Black feminist theory is a critical analysis that examines the lives and roles of Black women in society (Collins 2000). Studying the effects of living in a society dominated by Eurocentric hegemonic values, Black feminist theory seeks to analyze and provide solutions to many of the issues afflicting African American women today. As a popular field of study, hair in the Black community has become a main subject when discussing the sociopolitical ideologies constructed by hegemonic society. Provided below is a discussion of the main themes addressed in popular Black feminist theory. In this section I break up the conversation into three parts: Black women and assimilation; Black women and rebellion; as well as a section titled “Mammy, Jezebel, the Jiggaboo and the Wannabee,” where I discuss past socially constructed ideologies of the Black woman and how these constructions have contributed to modern day concepts of race and beauty.

BLACK WOMEN AND ASSIMILATION

Critical race theorists and Black feminist theorists alike, attribute African American women’s struggle with beauty and identity to values and aesthetics constructed by Eurocentric ideologies, ideologies that portray blue eyes, long and straightened hair as the ultimate beauty ideal (Banks 2000; Collins 2000; hooks 1992; Thompson 2009). Traced back to the slave era, when slave owners found it useful to control blacks physically through the tugging and pulling of their hair, ideologies of what it means to be both black and beautiful have in some ways been forced into a dichotomy, separating one from the other; therefore distorting positive images of blackness (Banks 2000; hooks 1992; Marrow 1973). This distorted perspective has forced a variety of Black women into the position of questioning their authentic identity, often choosing to adhere to dominant paradigms of beauty (hooks 1992; Thompson 2009).

bell hooks states: “There is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of White supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of Blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation and overall domination of all Black people” (1992:2). While this statement is an accurate one, what hooks fails to discuss here is that this “institutionalization” is worse for women than it is for men. By enforcing a paradigm that is constructed around the Eurocentric female body, hegemonic society has managed overtly to oppress, objectify, and exploit Black women, attacking the essence of their “natural” identity (Collins 2000).

Some Black feminist theorists discuss the ways in which African Americans throughout history have been ascribed the label of the “other” to that of the Eurocentric ideal (hooks 1992). “Marginalized groups deemed ‘other,’ who have been ignored, rendered invisible, can be seduced by the emphasis on ‘otherness’ (hooks 1992:26). Emphasizing their identity as “the other,” Black women seek ways in which they can emulate and even assimilate into dominant culture, in hopes of rendering themselves visible, not realizing that at the same time they are stifling the authentic ideologies of blackness (Banks 2000; Thompson 2009).

BLACK WOMEN AND REBELLION

Research shows that over the past few years there has been a resurgence in the Black community of messages of Black pride, messages that first arrived during the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 70s (Thompson 2009). Making way into different aspect of social culture, the message of Black pride’s emergence into the 21st century returns with it some of the Afrocentric hairstyles made popular in the past. Styles such as the afro have encouraged some women in the Black community to return to their “natural authentic roots.” By doing this women allow themselves the opportunity to acknowledge

and connect to the origin of their Blackness (Thompson 2009). While the assurance and presence of culture prompted by the natural, or non-chemical, hairstyle is somewhat celebrated in the Black community, the stigma of the Mammy stereotype still exists, attaching natural hair to negative images of beauty as well (Banks 2000;Thompson 2009).

Despite its Afrocentric aura, in comparison to its chemical counterpart, natural hair becomes a complex yet unique phenomenon. The word “natural” is often related to ideologies of purity as well as the act of being ‘normal.” However when “natural” is in contrast to straight hair it takes on a different identity. The chemicalized (relaxed/permed) hair is seen as the dominant and therefore “normal,” making the non-chemicalized natural “unnatural.” This oppositional construct alters paradigms of authenticity defining natural hair as an “unnatural” signifier of Black identity and culture (Banks 2000).

MAMMY, JEZEBEL, THE JIGGABOO, AND THE WANNABE

In 1998 popular film director, producer and writer Spike Lee released the movie *School Daze*, a movie dedicated to the Black college experience. In the movie, Lee presented audiences with the class/cultural/gendered struggle of Black women at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU’s), dividing the women between two social/cultural constructs: the wannabes and the jiggaboos. The wannabes were the light skin/straight hair “sista’s” who thought that they were better than the jiggaboos who were dark with natural hair. Lee constructed the names of the groups around the stereotype that light skin women wanted to be white, while the dark natural had to take on the role of the jiggaboo, a term derived out of the word “nigger,” or “nigga,” terms used to oppress, discriminate and exploit African Americans. By constructing these two words Lee expresses the ways in which skin

color, as well as hair style (the jiggaboos were often natural while the wannabes often wore long straight hair) divided Black women by constructions of beauty (Banks 2000; hooks 1992; Thompson 2009).

Lee's parody of Black women and their struggles with beauty identity is based on image ideologies constructed through early media and entertainment portrayals of light skin and dark skin women (Collins 2000). Prominent during the early days of film, Black women were often cast into a variety of discriminatory roles. The most popular of these were the mammy and the jezebel (Thompson 2009). Given to actresses such as Hattie McDaniel, the mammy was often portrayed as the overweight, dark skinned woman whose only role was to take care of the house hold as a maid. She was often desexualized, giving off the impression that her dark skin and weight size was unattractive to men. This however was not the case for the jezebel. The jezebel was an overtly sexualized character often seeking the love and sexual experience of men. She was usually a light skinned woman, portrayed by actresses such as Lena Horn. Unlike the mammy, the jezebel wore clothes that showed off her body in order to expose her beauty. The dichotomy of these two iconic portrayals paved the way for modern expressions of African American women both inside and outside the media (Collins 2000; hooks 1992; Thompson 2009).

The literature discussed above analyzes the ways in which hegemonic ideologies and the media have had a vital role of the construction of hair in the Black community and how those constructions have filtered into cultural ideologies of Blackness and beauty. Next I provide an overview of autoethnography as a critical social method of examining hair within the African American female community. Situating myself and my own experiences in the culture, I analyze and examine the ways in which hair plays a major role in determining and ascribing to cultural identities of Blackness.

A METHODOLOGY OF SELF

This project is a journey into my life of having “Black hair.” In order to do this I must put into perspective both past and present accounts of how my hair has formed my identity of being a Black woman. This project then becomes my story, my narrative. Below is an analysis of autoethnography (AE), a methodology used to create and analyze data through narrative and personal reflection (Ellis and Bocher 2000).

Not a traditional social science method, AE uses personal reflexivity to explore the connection between self and culture. It is an expressive dialogic methodology intersecting cultural study with lived experience (Ellis and Bocher 2000). Proponents of the research analyze it from the perspective of standpoint theory. However where standpoint studies the lives of other women, here the focus of the study rests purely on the writer (Ellis and Bocher 2000). This research does not come from an objective point of view; it is purely subjective. This means that instead of looking from the outside in, I am looking from the inside out. Writing from this position allows me the ability to be a part of the culture that I am studying and adds to the authenticity of the subject (Ellis and Bocher 2000).

SHARING MY JOURNEY: THE PROCEDURE OF DOING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

The point of writing AE is to analyze a cultural ideology from a personal, reflective perspective. This can be done through song, art, monologue or some sort of performance piece. It does not matter what form the project takes, as long as it is written from your point of view, narrated from your voice (Ellis and Bocher 2000). Here I’ve chosen a mixed method style of AE. What is analyzed is the culmination of journals I’ve written where I have recorded my thoughts, fears and trials of struggling with this type of identity. I have also included here the many interactions and conversations I’ve shared with others on the subject.

I've taken the mental, physical and emotional experiences that I've had and written them down here. This piece is an acknowledgement of a twenty-five year exploration. From my first set of cornrows to my last highlighting appointment, this piece is a construction of my hairstory.

LOOKING IN THE MIRROR: THE VALUE OF WRITING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Writing reflectively means looking back at my experiences and writing down what I see. Allowing myself to write this way, I can create a picture that is ever-flowing and always evolving. This is the process of AE. By using AE I am able to provide a raw account of my journey, allowing the reader to take a look into my world “up close and personal” (Ellis and Bocher). There is no separation from what I write and what you read. AE is a dialogic method, meaning that it makes space for writer and reader to have an intimate conversation. This conversation provides you with a better understanding of the culture that I am exploring.

But autoethnography is more than my own personal perspective. It is what I do with that perspective that makes it unique. Weaving in and out of personal experience and theoretical analysis, I present a potentially inclusive ideology of the experiences of Black women and their hair. Though this is a reflexive piece mirrored in my life, the discussions and stories also mirror those of women who share my standpoint, thus making the project one representation of an entire culture (Ellis and Bocher 2000).

WALKING A FINE LINE: THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF WRITING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

The ability to be completely open and free, along with the willingness to expose and express one's own personal thoughts

and feelings are key components to conducting an AE (Ellis and Bocher 2000). By choosing this method I have become the subject of analysis. My narrative holds the key to the questions, answers, and possible solutions to the issue at hand. This requires that I hold nothing back, that I remain truthful to you and that you remain open to the process (Ellis and Bocher 2000).

However, AE does have its drawbacks. Writing freely can sometimes distract a person from being open to the process of change. What I mean by this, is disallowing me to be upfront and open about all things pertaining to my experiences, thoughts, questions and reactions may, and sometimes does, push me into situations where reality is distorted. However, the point of AE is to embrace the whole experience, be it good or bad. I must fight the urge to hold back and be willing to confront the things that make me most afraid. In order to challenge and rearticulate the negative images and messages of Black female identity I must be willing to take the journey no matter where it may lead. A hard process, but it is the only way to construct a natural, authentic project (Ellis and Bocher 2000).

I will next discuss the findings that were generated from using AE.

Finding Myself

Sitting on the floor with grease on my forehead I say: “I feel like a sellout.” “Why?” my mom says. “Because I wanted to do this but I can’t.” “Well that’s not being a sellout Feliece, that’s doing what you need to do to survive.” I know what she’s saying has some truth in it, but I can’t help it. I started on this journey and now I’m abandoning it. In November of 2011 I decided that I was going to get my last hair relaxer; from that moment on I was going to stop getting the chemical product that made my hair straight and go completely natural. I was going to wear the natural style that I loved so much, portraying an

image of Black pride both inside and out. For months I went without using products produced to create the straight hair look; all of the products used during that period were designed to enhance the beauty of naturalness.

I was excited about going natural. Finally I was making a change, finally I was exploring a new world, embarking on a new adventure. It wasn't too long after I began anew that things began to get rough. You see, I am partially paralyzed on my right side, leaving my left side as the primarily functional side of my body. Going through the natural process forced me to maintain my hairstyles more frequently than I had while having straight hair. Many of the styles that I wanted I couldn't do myself and often required the assistance of my mother and sisters. This left me frustrated and defeated and after a while I couldn't take any more, the natural look had to go. So in January 2012, only two months after the decision to go natural, I sat in the middle of the floor, grease on my forehead and a towel around my neck (so it wouldn't burn my skin) allowing my mother to apply the chemical product once again. I was a sellout.

But who exactly was I a sellout to? Was I a sellout to myself or my best friend who supported me while on this journey or to my Black community in general? Why was this such a hard thing for me to reconcile? Maybe it was because in a society where hair is supposed to be your "crown and glory," and its cultural, social, and even political significance determines a woman's place within society (especially in ethnic communities), my decision became a heavily compounded and complex one (Banks 2000; hooks 1992; Thompson 2009). By deciding to go back to straight hair to me meant that not only was I giving up (I never give up) but that I was once again playing into societal ideologies of what it means for Black women to be beautiful, that is, to have straight, long hair (Banks 2000; Collins 2000; hooks 1992; Thompson 2009).

WHITE TOWELS, CLOTHES PINS AND SHIRLEY TEMPLE

Zomusa Mafu is my best friend since high school. A truly wonderful individual, her geographical and cultural identity is a very complex one to say the least. Born and raised here in Michigan from birth to age 4, she left the U.S in 1990 and moved to South Africa (SA), the homeland of her parents. After twelve years of living in SA she moved back to Michigan to live with a White missionary family while attending high school where we met. After high school she chose to move back to SA where she lived until about a year ago. Today she is back in Michigan living with the same missionary family that she did while in high school.

Since her return Maf (my nickname for her) and I have had a lot of conversations about the differences between African American and South African women. We've discussed different political views, history and relationships but what we discuss the most are the differences of beauty ideals in the two countries. Maf continually tells me that she feels as if SA women are more confident with the way they look than Black women. Then one day as we were discussing a paper that she was working on about Black hair (yes, she stole my idea) and she admits to me that there was a time that she didn't think that she was beautiful, especially when it came to her hair. She told me that as a little girl she'd get jealous of the women in her missionary family and their long blond hair, hating her Black kinky strands. To get around this she said she'd walk around the house wearing a towel on hair emulating what she called the "pretty White look." I was amazed. Standing before me was a woman so confident with her look of ebony brown skin and shoulder length dreadlocks, admitting that she once wanted to have long "pretty White hair." I didn't know what to make of this.

Later after she left I went to my mom and told her what Zomusa had said. My mother wasn't surprised one bit. She told me that her younger sister had done something similar when

she was little. She told me how my Aunt Diane used to put clothes line pins, the pins used to hold clothes up outside in order to get them dry, on the ends of her hair in order to make it look longer. Now I was already flabbergasted by Zomusa's testimony, but my mom's story put me over the moon. I mean, clothes pins, really? Probably not realizing it at the time, these two women were objectifying their Blackness by emulating styles of the hegemony (Collins 2000).

After hearing these two stories I began to think about the role of beauty ideologies in the consciousness of young Black girls. One of my favorite novelists is Toni Morrison, and in 1970 she wrote a novel titled the *Bluest Eye*, where one of the main characters, Pecola Breedlove, on top of a plethora of other issues believes that life would be better had she been a White girl. She is obsessed with White identity, stating that popular child actress at the time, Shirley Temple was the most fascinating girl in the world. In the novel Pecola constantly uses a cup with Temple's face on it to drink White milk. Pecola wants to be like Shirley and live the way that Shirley lives. She is a literary representation of little Black girls believing that in order to be beautiful you have to wear towels on your head like Maf, shove your hair in clothes pins like my Aunt Diane, or have blonde, curly hair like Shirley. This Black consciousness of beauty in the lives of young girls is something I will refer back to later in my discussion of Chris Rock's documentary *Good Hair*.

FRESH TO DEF—JOURNAL ENTRY #1

So I'm doing it! I just got my last perm. Can you believe it? I can't. I'm finally going to look like Ya-Ya, *Top Model* here I come! I was looking in *Essence* magazine the other day and saw a picture of her in the fashion section. Her hair was so FRESH to def! I knew the second I saw it that I wanted my hair to look like that. I keep thinking about whether I want dreads or not. I don't think so really. I think I just want that natural flow. You know the one that's a cross between afro and curly?

I don't think I have the confidence to pull the dreads off. Maf says I do, but mom says I don't, and you know how I feel when it comes to my mom's opinions. Either way I know I'll look sexy! But it's going to take a long time to get it to where I want it to be. Tish told me that it takes months for the chemical to cleanse out so it's going to be awhile before I can get that vibey look. But it'll be worth the wait. I'm so excited. I know I need a new look. I've been rocking the straight look since high school and I really want to do something different. But of course that's not the only reason I'm doing this. I'm doing this because I want to explore another side of my identity. Well it should be fun!

Work in Progress

GOLDILOCKS AND HER BLACK HAIR

In the midst of working on this project I came across an article entitled: *From Goldilocks to Dreadlocks: Hair-Raising Tales of Racializing Bodies*. The article, written by Tami Spry (2001), was an autoethnographic piece about her struggles of being a White woman with dreadlocks. The article spoke of the racial slurs, relationships lost, and frustrations of identity that came along with having such a racialized hairstyle. Even before I read the first word I knew what my perception of the article was going to be: *how dare this woman write, let alone wear, a hair style that is a major symbol of African and African American pride! I hate people like her. People who take what's authentically ours and try to turn it into something that they can eventually claim as theirs!* Despite these thoughts I knew that it'd be a great addition to my project and decided to read it anyway. I tried to keep an open mind while reading the article. I kept trying to tell myself that this woman has every right to wear this style and record the hardships and triumphs that went along with it; after all wasn't that what I'm doing with my project? But as I went along, those feelings of hate and annoyance began to creep into to the fore-

front of my thoughts. I was aggravated and upset that this woman had infringed on our identity rights; rights bestowed upon us at birth. I felt like she was trying to steal what was mine and it hurt.

Spry says: “Growing dreads is a way for me to foreground and interrupt master narratives of whiteness by embodying an alternate image not only of whiteness, but also of white womanhood” (52). This line frustrates me to no end. Doesn’t she realize that type of thinking does not work for us within the Black community? There is no way for us to, as she says, “interrupt narratives” of Blackness in the same way she is attempting to with whiteness. By wearing weaves or wigs and by dyeing our hair we are still seen as sellouts to our authentic roots (Banks 2000). While she does discuss her experiences of racism, her image of “white womanhood” still privileges her choices over those of us in the Black community. Our hair is not merely a social and/or racial experiment, it is part of a nationwide political construct, one that determines every aspect of our daily lives; a construct we can never escape (Banks 2000; Thompson 2009).

Two days after reading the article I sat with a personal friend of mine, the only White person I ever knew to have dreads. I asked her “did you experience racism when you had dreads?” “Of course,” She replied. “How could I not.” She began to tell me a story about when she and a few friends of hers were in the Deep South and was verbally attacked for having dreadlocks. Listening to her story, I tried to imagine what the situation looked like. I imagined a group of White people minding their own business, being assaulted by two Black men for no other reason than the way they wore their hair. Part of me felt bad. I mean, here was this person, my friend, who had experienced a dramatic, somewhat traumatic, racist event. While I truly had sympathy for her, there was another part of me that was screaming *duh, they should’ve done that to you! I mean in the South wearing a hairstyle that belongs to us? You’re lucky they didn’t hurt you!*

Feeling bad for my friend, I went back home and read the

article again. I truly wanted to give this woman the benefit of the doubt. I wanted to see if there was anyway her experience of having “Black hair” paralleled mine having “White hair.” Come to find out in some ways it did. The responses to her by White individuals about being a “wigger” (White nigger) were similar to comments to me about my wanting to look like a White girl (interestingly enough these comments were made to me by people in the Deep South). Though her experience was somewhat different than mine on a personal level, the collectiveness of our combined experiences proved to be uniquely the same. Though we do have a collective consciousness about hair and its racialized identity, I still have to admit that Spry’s “exotic headpiece” continues to rub me the wrong way.

JUST SIT BACK AND RELAX: CHRIS ROCK’S DOCUMENTARY “GOOD HAIR”

“Yeah I’m doing my capstone on Black women and their hair.” “Well have you seen that movie by that comedian dude? What’s his name? You know him. He did that movie about Black Women—” “Yeah I know who he is. Chris Rock. I’m going to use him for the paper.” This question comes up every time I tell people the topic of my project. Though it’s asked by practically everyone I come in contact with, it is White people who suggest the movie the most. It’s as if they believed that the documentary was the Holy Grail of studying Black women and their hair. Sometimes it made me not even want tell them about the project.

I’m not sure if that was the primary reason for me not wanting to watch the movie right away, but no matter how many times it came on HBO I’d shy away from the movie. It’d come on and I’d say ok I’ll watch it the next time it came on but I never did. Then once its presence on the cable networks began to wear off I decided to order the movie online, but even after I did that, it sat on my shelf for a long time. There was something about it that made me scared; something about

that documentary made me want to run away. Finally after weeks of it collecting dust at the bottom of the shelf I sat down beside my sister, pad and pen in hand, and began to watch the horror film. And what I saw intrigued, annoyed, shocked and inspired me. Rock studied almost every aspect of the Black hair industry. He interviewed popular hairstylists in the industry, spoke to celebrities about their hair stories, he even went to India to learn about their involvement in the African American weave process.

I was really excited about the level of depth that Rock went through to give his audience an all-inclusive look into the culture of Black women and our hair. But as I began to watch the movie more closely and really think about the people being interviewed and the comments made, I noticed that there was something very wrong about what he was doing. Though he may not have intended it, the majority of Rock's interviewee's were women with straight, relaxed, weaved hair. Rarely were there women who glamorized the natural look. To me this defeated the purpose of the piece. While I do understand that the movie is titled "Good Hair," the subject was supposed to be about Black women and the struggles of choosing between natural and relaxed. In my mind this did not mean speaking only with relaxed women but all women. I was seriously annoyed with this lack of representation.

While this snafu did irritate me, what bothered me the most was the oppressive and over sexualized nature of Black women by White men in the film. Rock visited a popular hair convention in Atlanta, GA where the most popular hairstylists in the country come together to compete to show who's the best. During these events the stylists must put on a performance to express their talents as the best in the business. One of the most praised in the competition was a White man named Jason. Admired by both clients and colleagues, his show appalled me. Placed on the stage was a bed filled with Black women barely dressed fawning over Jason while he did their hair. To see these women practically naked while this White man styled one of the most important aspects of their psychi-

cal nature frustrated me. I mean are you kidding me? What did their wearing bra and panties have to do with hair? It was a classic representation of White men ruling power over Black women (Banks 2000; hooks 1992; Thompson 2009).

I WHIP MY HAIR BACK AND FORTH

What intrigued me the most in Chris Rock's film was a little girl, seven years of age, who appeared in it. In a scene where she was sitting next to her mother, she expressed to Rock that her first perm was given at age five. Yup that's right, I said "five." The little girl sat in a chair of a beauty salon while a beautician put harsh chemical products in her hair. But that wasn't the least of it. The little girl told Rock that the reason she got relaxers was so that she would be pretty, "because in order to be pretty you have to get a relaxer." I couldn't believe it. I tried to think back to when I got my first perm, and I realized that I wasn't too much older than she. At age eight I sat in a beauty shop and just like the little girl in Rock's film, I sat still while the stylists put the magic potion of beauty in my hair.

When I was little I had extremely long, extremely thick (some would say nappy) hair. It was very tough to handle. Washing my hair would be a hassle for me and my mom; I'd stand over the sink with my hair flowing into the drain. Turning my head was a huge problem. I'd look left and a huge gust of hair would slap me in the face. Finally one day my mother had had enough. She took me to her friend, one of the best stylists in the city, and demanded that she give me a relaxer. Now I had no idea what a relaxer was at that time but if it was going to keep my hair from stopping up the drain then I was all for it. I sat patiently as the stylist worked magic on my crown and glory. And what a glory it was. When she finished, my hair was straight, shiny and pretty. This time when I whipped my head this way and that, it didn't slap me in the face but flowed freely in the wind. No one could tell me that I wasn't beautiful; I knew the deal, I was the bomb. I went to school the next day

confident that I looked just as pretty as the blue eyed blond girl sitting next to me.

So as I sat there watching *Good Hair*, and as I listened to what this little girl was saying I felt sad for her, and yet I understood her. I realized that the words coming from her mouth and the feelings she was expressing weren't hers but her mother's. As her daughter spoke to Rock, you could see the happy expression on the mother's face. She was smiling and mouthing the words "that's right" to every single comment her daughter made. And I thought back once again to little Pecola Breedlove and her fixation on Shirley Temple. This obsession did not come from her mind alone, but was suggested to her through media images and the idolizing of White women by Black female society. The same was true for this little girl; the same was true for me. My adherence to portraying the image of the White female was ingrained in me by a societal construct. Who's to say who I would be, what I would look like, had I not sat in that chair seventeen years ago? All of us, the little girl, Pecola, and I, are prisoners in the complex trap of being products of a societal norm (Banks 2000; hooks 1992; Thompson 2009).

HAPPY TO BE NAPPY: JOURNAL ENTRY #2

Well it's week 3 and I'm still here. Yea!!! I can tell that the relaxer is beginning to wear out now. Had this been a few months ago it would've been time to call Tish and get these naps out but I'm strong and not giving up. Washed it last night and put the Carols Daughter products in. I washed it in the shampoo and put in the smoothie, I love the smoothie! Then mom braided it up and I'm taking them down this morning. Can't wait to see how it looks. I have to admit though, I'm a little nervous. What happens if I don't like it? I told myself that I'd see this through. And you know how insecure I am. What if my mom doesn't like it? What if Maf hates it? Then what? Tish already told me that if I continue to do this then she won't be able to do my hair anymore. And mom told me that she won't

do this forever. I can't handle this on my own. Maybe I'll go where Maf goes, that place Happy to be Nappy. She told me that they only take clients with natural hair. But that stuff's expensive. Maf told me that she spent like \$80 to get her dreads washed and twisted. \$80? That's crazy! I mean I'll spend that much on a relaxer and highlights but for dreads? You've got to be kidding me. But maybe it won't be that much for me. I mean I'm not getting dreads. I'm only getting a wash and then let my hair run free any way it chooses to go (FREEDOM!) But I'm about to take these things down now so here's hoping I turn out as beautiful as I want to be!

Work in Progress

THE UNNATURALNESS OF BEING NATURAL

My Godmother and I are very close. We share everything with each other; she's practically my second mom. So naturally every opinion that she has about me and my life choices I take to heart. One day as I was arriving to her house, she looked at me with a crinkled nose and forehead, her look of disapproval, and I say "What did I do now?" "What's wrong with that head of yours gal? You look like that Erykah Badu girl. You look nappy." I wanted to say that that was the look I was going for, but I decided that the comment would only lead to more ridicule and I didn't want to go that route. Honestly this comment didn't surprise me one bit. The fact that my hair was running wild with its natural flow was something I knew all of my older Aunts would have a problem with. My hair wasn't silky and straight, which to them was a big no-no. "How you gonna get a job with that hair," I could hear them saying, "don't you know men don't want a gal with a nappy head?" I knew that by choosing this style I was not only rebelling against mainstream cultural values, I was rebelling against the values set forth by the women who raised me. To them what I was doing was more

than a hair change, it was a step backwards from the life lessons they'd preached to me my entire life.

So why is it that natural is not natural? What was it about my look that caused my Godmother to have a near heart attack? In his book *400 Years Without a Comb* (1973), Willie Marrow discusses the fact that during slavery days masters would often hold their slaves by the hair during verbal punishments. Add to that the stereotypical cultural images of the past of what was required for Black women to be beautiful, the culture still struggles to find a safe haven to glorify naturalness. Both bell hooks, in her text *Black Looks: Race and Representations*, and Chris Rock's documentary recognize the issue of Black women viewing the natural as unnatural. The concept here is that naturalness can only be achieved through what is considered to be normal, and in the society in which we live "natural" is anything but normal. So to be accepted into society, we have created this construct that says that the natural state of the Black woman is a false identity. What portrays the truth of what a Black woman is supposed to be flows through a chemicalized product that alters the presence of naturalness. But how did we get here? How did we get to a point where I am being scolded for wearing the hair that I was born with? The negative stereotypes placed upon Black women in the past run so deep that we still reject the ideology that our natural state of being can be the most authentic way to express our Blackness (Banks 2000; hooks 1992; Thompson 2009).

LOOKING IN THE MIRROR: JOURNAL ENTRY #3

I feel so ugly today. I looked in the mirror and all I saw was a great big mistake! I can't do anything with this mess. It's all matted up in the back because I can't wrap it anymore. I hate this! Why did I decide to do this? Oh that's right, I wanted to explore a different side of my identity. How stupid am I? To think that I could look like Angela Davis? How did she do it,

because I feel like giving up! Mom is getting to the point where she's done with it." It's getting too nappy for me to handle" she says. I can't believe she's dropping out on me. What am I supposed to do without her? It's so in-between right now. It's like it's not where I need it to be yet but I hate where it is. I don't think I'm going to make it. I think that I'm at the end of my rope. I feel like a failure!!!

Work in Progress

THE CREAMY CRACK

The relaxer to me is more than a straightener. As it is to most Black women, it is my identifier as a woman socially, politically and culturally. I cannot escape it. Zomusa always talks about hair and getting a job, and she can't fathom why the style and texture of my hair could ever interfere with mine (or even her) career. "It's all about image" I tell her. No one's going to hire me if I show up with dreads like hers. The political culture that we live in demands that I look as closely as possible to that of the White female (Banks 2000; Thompson 2009). I tell her that's the reason why I continue to get the creamy crack in the first place. It's my addiction to help me gain acceptance in my American society.

I do it to be accepted by White people, envied by other Black women, and attractive to Black men. She asks me: "Is it really that serious?" "Yes it's that serious." The relaxer is the antidote for the Black woman's cultural illness: her nappy kinky hair. Without this medicine we women would never be viewed as beautiful. We call it our "crown and glory," but how would it be glorious if it doesn't look pretty? This is such a backwards ideology, but the truth is that it's an ideology that many of us both inside and outside the community live by (Banks 2000; Thompson 2009).

MY BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL: JOURNAL ENTRY #4:

I got the relaxer! And I'm not bugging over it anymore. I was sad at first; feeling like a sellout, but that's all changed now. I'm no longer chained to the notion that we are as Al Sharpton says "combing my oppression." I understand that the creamy crack is a societal product created to force me into a specific form of identity, but I'm not going to let that happen. I'm beautiful either way it goes. I'm not saying that I'll never go natural again, because it truly is an identity that I'd like to explore; All I'm saying is that I'm happy being who I am because always: MY BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL

Evolving!

I Am Not My Hair

It's been four months since that conversation with my mother about being a sellout. I now understand her comments about the need to survive. There is nothing wrong with the way I look. There is nothing wrong with wanting to look like Beyonce or Erykah Badu. More than anything there is nothing wrong with wanting to look like me. This is something that is rarely included in the conversation; the fact that in order for us to ever be beautiful, we must first find beauty within ourselves, not look to the outside world for a hint.

In the construction and exploration of this project I have learned that there is no one set of rules to determine authentic Blackness. Going through this process, I understand that in order that we as Black women shed the racist and sexist stereotypes, in order for us to be happy with who we are as women, we must define our own ideology of identity. Our self-defined standpoint, as Patricia Hill Collins calls it, can only come from our creation of it. We live in a society where we are constantly judged for what we are and what we aren't, who we are and who we should be. This is not the answer to the problem. bell

hooks states: “The deeply ideological nature of imagery determines not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves” (hooks, 1992;5). And she’s right. There can be no sense of self empowerment for our community if we choose not to challenge the societal paradigm of the ultimate Black woman.

I realize that it doesn’t matter whether my hair is straight, long, kinky, nappy or curly; what matters is the way I view and have pride for who I am as a woman. While my hair does in fact play a major role in how I am looked at culturally, socially, and politically, it is only through myself and the collective experiences of women like me that that role can change (Collins 2000).

Good hair means curls and waves, bad hair means you look like a slave. And the turn of the century it’s time for us to redefine who we be. You can shave it off like a South African beauty; grow your own locks like Bob Marley; You can rock it straight like Oprah Winfrey. It’s not what’s on your head it’s what’s underneath!

—Lyrics: *I Am Not My Hair* By India.Arie

REFERENCES

Banks, I (2000). *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women’s Consciousness* New York and London: New York University Press.

Collins, H P (2000). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York and London: New York University Press.

Ellis and Bocher. (2000). “Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject.” *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Ed. N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks: Sage. 733–768.

hooks, b (1992). *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. New York: Routledge.

Marrow, W (1973). *400 Years Without a Comb*. San Diego: Black Publishers of San Diego.

Morrison, Toni (1994). *The Bluest Eye*. New York: The Penguin Group.

Rock, C (2009). *Good Hair*. New York; Lionsgate Films.

Spry, T (2001). "From Goldilocks to dreadlocks: Hair-raising tales of racializing bodies." In *The Green Window: Proceedings of the Giant City Conference of Performative Writing*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 52–65.

Thompson, C (2009). "Black Women, Beauty, and Hair as a Matter of Being." *Women's Studies: An Inter-Disciplinary Journal* 38: 831–56.